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ABSTRACT

After some initial comments on Robert Calfee's discussion of ways in which theory and research in reading assessment can help decision makers, the author makes two points: (1) we need to provide a much better education for reading teachers than is currently being provided, and this will require radically larger amounts of time than are currently given to it; and (2) real improvement in students' reading ability is only likely to come when the various people involved (including test and program developers, university professors, and public school teachers and administrators) work together to improve the assessment and consequent instruction of their students. (AA)

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A Response to Robert Calfee's "How Theory and Research on Reading Assessment Can Serve Decision-Makers

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Like many of the papers presented at the Literacy Conference, Professor Calfee's paper is sane, balanced, and thoughtful. Although I would not have written the same paper, there is little in the paper with which I directly disagree. What I am going to do here, therefore, is to first briefly mention two of Professor Calfee's points that I would particularly emphasize and one of his points that I have some qualms about and then use several of his points to advance two of my own perspectives on literacy.

The first point I want to emphasize concerns reliability. All I can do here is echo Professor Calfee. Most current tests do not yield reliable profiles of subskills, and current practices used to achieve reliable total test scores mitigate against creating reliable subtests. We obviously need reliable subtests if we are to plan instruction appropriately.

The second point I would emphasize concerns the theory behind the test suggested. In taking as his starting point the assumption of independent processing--"that the mind carries out certain activities through the operation on independent cognitive processes" -- and developing from that assumption an information processing model that emphasizes attention, decoding, and word understanding skills as separable processes involved in a "student's ability to 'read' and understand single words," Professor Calfee is very definitely beginning from a theoretical perspective that can have practical instructional implications. A logical instructional procedure to use with a child who understands a large number of words but can read only those he has been explicitly taught is to teach decoding skills. And the theory behind Professor Calfee's test leads directly to focused instruction such as this.

The notion of focused instruction for each child leads to a third point Professor Calfee considers. This is the one I have some qualms about. The qualms have to do with

CS 003 621

the practical feasibility of individualization. In talking about what a teacher needs to know, Professor Calfee states that a test should reveal a "student's unique pattern of strengths and weaknessess." My question is that of how much detail that the teacher needs and can be reasonably expected to use. I repeatedly hear the assertion that individualization is one of the most important goals that teachers should work toward. In a paper presented earlier at this conference, Professor Popp notes that her own research has indicated the value of diagnostic prescriptive practices followed by individualized instruction and cites results obtained by Samuels and Edwall (1967) as also supporting individualized instruction. However, the findings of Samuels and Edwall also support the value of structure, and the major review of research recently completed by Rosenshine (1977) again indicates value of structure. In keeping with the latter findings, my own work in tutoring (Graves, 1976, Graves and Patberg, 1976) and the work of Ellson (Ellson, 1976; Ellson, Harris, and Barber, 1968) Rosenbaum (1973), and Von Harrison (1972) indicates the value of highly structured programs that permit individualization almost solely in terms of rate.

In light of these findings regarding the value of structure, I am very seriously concerned about how much structure, sequence, and order the teacher can provide while creating individualized programs. In fact, while it is undeniably true that there are a number of classrooms in which instruction is not geared to the varying needs of the students, ones in which individualization is vitally needed, there are a number of other classrooms in which the attempt of individaulization results in chaos, in each student doing something different but with few if any of them following a structure sequence that makes much sense.

I turn now to a consideration of several of Professor Calfee's points from which I will attempt to draw two of my perspectives on literacy. In his comments on theories, Professor Calfee both recognizes the very limited effect that theories of reading have had in solving practical problems and holds out for the potential value of theory - - "Nothing," he echoes a host of theoriticians, "is so practical as a good theory." And,

he continues, "an adequate theory of reading should point us to appropriate methods of test design and construction, and should direct us to proper techniques of analysis and interpretation of the results." In the paper previously mentioned, Professor Popp also argues for the practical value of theories, noting that at least some theories have very definite instructional implications. As part of her argument, she shows how different theories lead to different instructional programs -- programs "beginning with sound-symbol correspondences (Lippincott) . . . and moving up to syllables and words, phrases and short sentences," or programs, "beginning with sentences, working down to words and finally to letter correspondences (Scott Foresman)." This is certainly true. Different theories do suggest different instructional practices. The problem is that there are a plethora of theories, many of which point in different directions. As Professor Calfee put in a previous paper, "The troops seem in considerable disarray." (1976, p.44)

This disarray, I believe, must be recognized and acknowledged in any serious consideration of the effect of theory on practice. The knowledge necessary to make informed decisions about competing theories, and hence informed decisions about competing tests and competing instructional practice, is needed by test developers, by those of us who train teachers, by teachers, and by those school officials who purchase tests. Such theoretical knowledge is not currently shared by members of these various groups. In fact, information about the theory behind specific testing procedures is rarely included in test manuals. Moreover, at the present time, including such information in test manuals would probably be of little use. According to Burrows (1965), the vast majority of test sales are the result of marketing practices rather than of the quality of the tests. This is not surprising when most test users lack the background knowledge to reasonably assess tests.

Another point Professor Calfee makes is that concern and confusion about testing is rampant. The confusion exists because of the cited inadequacies of the tests for the purposes for which they are often used, and it exists because of the lack of

understanding about tests (more specifically about norms) by both school people and the public. Professor Calfee explains the inadequacies of the tests quite clearly, but I think more needs to be said about the lack of knowledge about tests and testing. By way of illustration, I will cite some experiential evidence. At a recent national conference attended by Ph.D. candidates in the language arts, some 20 percent of those present failed to correctly answer a multiple choice item which essentially asked, "What does a percentile rank indicate?" (Graves and Koziol, 1974) More immediately, in surveys of several inservice reading courses I teach, only 40 percent of the teachers correctly answered the same question. If the majority of teachers and a sizeable percentage of Ph.D. candidates do not understand even the simplest statistics used to report test results, then much of the general public is almost certainly confused by reported test statistics.

The result of this confusion is concern, and this concern has different consequences for the general public and for teachers. On the one hand, large numbers of the general public berate the schools for their general ineffectiveness, and half the parents in the country worry because their children score below grade level. The support for schooling wanes. At a time when the decline of the school age population, the decline of federal support, and rising costs make the schools increasingly dependent on local support, voters are becoming increasingly unwilling to pay for schooling. Parents demand "return to the basics" and schools respond by dropping innovative programs and replacing them with traditional programs.

On the otherhand, a very common consequence of teachers becoming confused about testing is for teachers to become extremely wary of tests and test results. One response to such wariness is to ignore test results. In one district in which I taught a class attended by teachers who had <u>volunteered</u> to lead a district-wide reading effort, not one of the teachers in the class knew <u>where</u> the standardized test results were. In another district, the standardized test results of all of the students in two schools were lost. A more extreme response to the fear of testing is to see testing

as constituting a serious threat to students. Teachers in a nearby school are not permitted to see the standardized test results because the teachers themselves voted against being allowed to see them. In still another case, a teacher in a compensatory education program I administer quit rather than give students a ten minute test on the vocabulary he had been teaching for six weeks.

What I want to suggest, from both consideration of the need to deal with theory in order to make intelligent decisions about tests and consideration of the confusion and concern that tests frequently cause, is that many of those involved in the teaching of reading need to be better educated than they currently are. In particular, I'm thinking of the classroom reading teacher.

Let me hasten to add here that I am not placing the blame for this lack of education on teachers. As Professor Bormouth pointed out in the paper which opened this conference, the information exchanged in a learning situation depends both on the receiver and the message. And teachers in this country have been getting an extremely thin message. An analogy based on personal experience may serve to illustrate this point. Some years ago, the army sent me to typing school. That school lasted four hours a day, five days a week, for four weeks -- a total of 80 hours. During that 80 hours, I did learn to type, but I did not learn to type very well, and I still have to look at the keyboard to find the keys for quotation marks and other symbols. By contrast, today, in 70 percent of the teacher-training institutions in this country, students preparing to be elementary reading teachers receive 30 or fewer hours of classroom instruction in teaching reading. (Morrison and Austin, 1977) I think that is absurb and an outrage.

My first perspective on literacy, therefore, is that we need to provide a much better education for reading teachers than we are currently providing and that in order to provide such an education we are going to have to devote radically larger amounts of time to that task than we currently give it.

My second perspective on literacy is closely related to the first. It stems from points Professor Calfee makes about the test for reading single words and about

the Interactive Reading Assessment System (IRAS).

I will take as a given the model of attention, decoding, and lexical interpretation that underlies the test. But then I have a question. Why, of the myriad of factors that might be considered to effect attention, is the specific factor of a quiet room versus a noisy room tested? Other variables come immediately to mind: time of day, first thing in the morning versus ninth period: span of attention, the first five minutes versus the last five minutes in thirty minutes of reading; or topic, current movies versus nineteenth century housing costs. Certainly, reaction to both room noise and time of day provide us with some information about a student's pattern of attention. But equally certain is the fact that some kids would be greatly bothered by room noise and unaffected by time of day while others would respond in an opposite fashion. And, of course, the reaction to the other indicies of attention suggested will also vary differentially with students.

Similar questions could be raised about the variable affecting word understanding. Familiarity as indicated by frequency is one possibility. But again other variables, such as length and level of abstraction, come to mind.

Turning to the IRAS, I have somewhat different questions. I wonder, for example, about the practice of testing only silent reading. I wonder about the reliability of the profiles of question types when relatively few questions of each type can be found. I also wonder about the feasibility of asking kids to pick appropriate paragraphs. A myriad of other questions come to mind, but here I will only note two more. When I read that one feature of the IRAS will allow teachers to assess the effects of giving students prompts. I am curious about many aspects of performance a test can reasonably assess. And when I learn that recognition versus production is to be tested, I am curious about how teachers will be able to use the results.

Considering this rather long list of questions, I would note that the answers must come from varied sources. Theory, for example, provides some information. Theory,

for example, tells us something about the relationship between oral and silent reading. And the question of how able students are to pick appropriate paragraphs can be answered empirically. But some of the other questions, such as those about useful indicies of attention or the number of apsects of performance that can reasonably be tested, as best answered by practicing classroom teachers.

This leads directly to the second perspective on literacy I would offer. Those of us in university teaching and research positions must do more than provide a better education for reading teachers, we must also receive a better education from reading teachers. Real improvement in students reading ability is only likely to come when the various persons that effect the reading program students receive -- test developers, program developers, university professors, and public school teachers and administrators--work together to improve the assessment and the consequent instruction that students receive.

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